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Keeping Up With Hanuman: Reimagining the Myth of Hanuman through Animation

Mrinalini Mitra¹

Abstract

Hanuman (2005) distinguished itself from the previous films by mimicking and adopting an animation style that was adopted in Western superhero movies and cartoons. The favorable response of the Indian community and diaspora to the movie Hanuman coupled with the fact that Hanuman had previously been adapted in basic arcade and online games as the main hero, inspired the Indian digital gaming industry. This essay analyzes the popularity of the 'animated' Hanuman and the Indian audiences eagerness to ingest Hanuman's stories through animation. What makes Hanuman appealing to new media genres, like animation, in the Indian sub-continent? How do the animated visual representations of Hanuman challenge, embellish, alter, or rewrite the myth, iconography, and, broadly, the religiosity of Hanuman worship?

On October 21, 2005, a new kind of movie premiered in theaters across India called *Hanuman*, marketed as the country's first animated feature film. The Indian television and theatre screens had been used previously to share mythic narratives like *Shri Krishna Janma* (1918), *Jai Santoshi Ma* (1975) and *Bajrangbali* (1976) to name a few. However, *Hanuman* (2005) distinguished itself from the previous films by mimicking and adopting an animation style that was adopted in Western superhero movies and cartoons. The movie adapted childhood myths of Hanuman and his later adventures with Ram in Lanka. Posters and advertisements of the movie starred a baby Hanuman with chubby legs and doe eyes, resembling not a simian but human infant, carrying the traditional mace and sporting a monkey's tail and jaw. The image of baby Hanuman sparked the curiosity of young children and aroused the "aww" factor in the adult audience.² Box-office collections for *Hanuman* proved very profitable for the movie's production house. In the first month of its release, *Hanuman* managed to surpass movies that featured Salman Khan and Sanjay Dutt in lead roles.³ Predictably, the success of Hanuman created

¹ I would like to express my gratitude to Dr John Cort for his advice, guidance, and the opportunity to write this paper. I would also like to thank my sister Nyonika Mitra for reading my multiple drafts and for her continued love and support.

² "Hanuman Rides High!" *The Times of India*, Oct 29, 2005, <https://denison.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/1516348036?accountid=10474>.

³ Meena Iyer, "Kyon Ki, Hanuman is Bigger than Salman!" *The Times of India*, Nov 10, 2005: <https://denison.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/1516351816?accountid=10474>.

a trend of adapting Indian mythological narratives into animated feature films. *Hanuman* was followed by *Krishna* (2006), *My Friend Ganesha* (2007), *Bal Ganesha* (2007), and even its own sequel *Hanuman Returns* (2007). Unfortunately for the Indian animation industry, none of the movies that followed *Hanuman* enjoyed the same success as its predecessor.

However, the favorable response of the Indian community and diaspora to the movie *Hanuman*, coupled with the fact that Hanuman had previously been adapted in basic arcade and online games as the main hero, inspired the Indian digital gaming industry.⁴ *Hanuman: Boy Warrior* became the first digital game developed entirely by an Indian digital gaming company—Aurora Technologies, based in Hyderabad.⁵ *Hanuman: Boy Warrior* was a console game designed for PlayStation 2. The game was subject to intense debate in media and criticized for disrespecting the Hindu deity Hanuman, as it allowed the player to control and manipulate the deity (more on this later).⁶ Nonetheless, the controversy surrounding the game did not hinder the creation of similar games adopting Hindu deities as main figures. California based digital games startup Gamaya Inc. launched a game based loosely in the Ramayana universe called *Gamaya Legend* in 2015. The game received enough positive reviews to inspire arguably India's first 3D animated movie *Hanuman vs Mahiravana* (2018).⁷ The movie *Hanuman vs Mahiravana* recounts the tale of Hanuman's adventure in the underworld to save Rama and Lakshman. Though the movie was subject to harsh criticism in mass media and failed to impress its audience, it highlights the Indian animation industry's penchant for Hanuman's myth and stories.

Each of the above mentioned 'firsts'⁸ in the history of the Indian media feature Hanuman as their primary hero. Emerging media genres like digital gaming and animated cinematography that target the Indian community and diaspora by incorporating Indian mythological narratives find Hanuman's stories to be a good place to start. Hanuman has successfully and almost effortlessly been incorporated into the "new" media through movies, video games, and television shows. However, research on Hanuman's iconography and popularity has not extended to the world of animation where Hanuman often exists as a baby or boy wonder. In this essay I analyze the popularity of the 'animated' Hanuman and the Indian audiences eagerness to ingest Hanuman's stories through animation. What makes

⁴ Xenia Zeiler, "The Global Mediatization of Hinduism through Digital Games: Representation versus simulation in *Hanuman: Boy Warrior*" in *Playing with Religion in Digital Games*, eds., Heidi A. Campbell and Gregory Price Grieve (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 73.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁷ Sameer Mitha, "Gamaya Legend Review" *Skoar* (blog), January 27, 2016, <https://skoar.digit.in/mobile/gamaya-legend-review/>.

⁸ See notes 2, 3 and 7.

Hanuman appealing to new media genres, like animation, in the Indian sub-continent? To answer this question, I will examine Hanuman's growth from a minor to a major deity. A brief account of the growth of Hanuman's popularity through the middle ages to the twenty-first century allows us to understand the animated media's appetite for Hanuman. In my concluding section, I address how the animated visual representations of Hanuman challenge, embellish, alter, or rewrite the myth, iconography, and, broadly, the religiosity of Hanuman worship.

Multiplicity of Hanuman Stories

To demonstrate Hanuman's increased adoration in the last century, I will first give a brief account of Hanuman's rise to prominence in literary works. Hanuman first appears in Valmiki's *Ramayana*. The epic *Ramayana* narrates the story of Lord Rama, an avatar of god Vishnu, and his heroic rescue of his beautiful and virtuous wife Sita. Rama, the eldest son of King Dasharatha and Queen Kaushalya, has three brothers from his father's two other wives—Bharata (Queen Kaikeyi's son), and Lakshman and Shatrughna (Queen Sumitra's sons) who are twins. When Dasharatha is forced to send Rama into exile because of a promise he made to Kaikeyi, Rama is accompanied by Sita and Lakshman to live a life in the forest for fourteen years. In the forest, Sita is abducted by Ravana, the rakshasa (demon) king of Lanka. It is then that Rama and Lakshman seek the help of Hanuman and the vanara (monkey) army to rescue Sita by conquering Ravana.

Within Hanuman scholarship, there is a debate on whether Valmiki invented the divine-monkey and his story or adopted it. Scholars who support the later view usually point to the enigmatic hymn, Rig Veda 10.86.⁹ The hymn records a conversation between Indra, the king of *svarga* (Heaven), and his wife Indrani. Indrani tells her husband that his supposed friend Vrishakapi has taken or polluted the offerings made to Indra. She describes this Vrishakapi "as a 'bullish' or 'large, virile' monkey."¹⁰ The hymn has been interpreted in multiple ways; some interpretations highlight the sexuality of the monkey,¹¹ and others focus on Indrani's description of the monkey as "bullish."¹² These varied interpretations of Vrishakapi and his connection to Hanuman offer distinct insights about the context in which Valmiki was writing and the reasons that may have inspired the inclusion of the *vanaras* (monkeys), Hanuman in particular, into the *Ramayana*. However, for the purpose

⁹ Philip Lutgendorf, "Monkey in the Middle: The Status of Hanuman in Popular Hinduism," *Religion*, 27 no. 4 (1997): 311 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1006/reli.1997.0095>

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 316.

¹¹ For example, Stephanie W Jamison, *Sacrificed Wife/sacrificer's wife: Women, Ritual, and Hospitality in Ancient India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

¹² Lutgendorf, "Monkey in the Middle," 316.

of this paper, I limit the discussion to Lutgendorf's reading of Valmiki's inclusion of the monkey hero. I am substantially convinced by Lutgendorf's argument that Hanuman's "characteristically ludicrous and liminal status... enabled the Ramayana poet to effect a striking narrative juxtaposition: a noble but outcast hero reduced to consorting with subhuman beings who, paradoxically, prove ideal allies and friends."¹³ The relationship of Rama and Hanuman, and especially Hanuman's status as a monkey, may have served as a model of the hero/clown match often employed in classical drama.¹⁴

Hanuman's simian status is further complicated through his birth-narratives. The Ramayana repeatedly alludes to Hanuman's relationship to Vayu, the god of wind, by addressing Hanuman as Pavanaputra, Maruti, Vayuputra, etc.¹⁵ Valmiki gives two accounts of Hanuman's birth story and consistently identifies him as the son of Anjani, a celestial nymph, married to Kesari, a monkey hero. In both the narratives of Hanuman's birth in the Sanskrit Ramayana, Anjani is raped by the wind god Vayu, and it is from this encounter that Hanuman is born. This relatively straightforward account of Hanuman's birth is complicated in later purana collections.

The name Vayuputra, meaning the son of Vayu, can be interpreted as a *vidyadhara* or magician who is capable of flying at will.¹⁶ The *Padma Purana* by Ravisenacarya, a Jaina text, emphasizes that Hanuman, along with other *vanaras*, were *vidyadharas* and not ill-behaved animals with tails; they were beings embodying both human and supernatural qualities. Other birth narratives maintain Hanuman's monkey feature but deliberately muddle his patrimony. The *Shiva Purana* traces Hanuman's birth to the episode when Vishnu takes the form of a female temptress Vishvamohini to keep demons away from the nectar of immortality during the churning of the cosmic ocean. Shiva overwhelmed with Vishvamohini's beauty, ejaculates and Vayu carries the semen to Anjani. In this narrative Hanuman is imagined to possess the power of all the three gods—Vishnu, Shiva, and Vayu.¹⁷ The *Bhavishya Purana* narrates Hanuman's conception through the unification of Kesari and Anjani, the twist in the story, however, is that Kesari while sleeping with Anjani is possessed by Shiva and subsequently Vayu.¹⁸

This proliferation and multiplicity of Hanuman's birth narratives may not have been widely known to ancient and medieval Hindus. Nonetheless, as Lutgendorf notes, the multiple birth narratives give genetic accounts of various characteristics

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid. Lutgendorf cites his personal conversations with Sunthar Visuvalingam as a source.

¹⁵ Joginder Narula, *Hanuman, God and Epic Hero: The Origin and Growth of Hanuman in Indian Literary and Folk Tradition* (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1991), 13.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Lutgendorf, "Monkey in the Middle," 318.

¹⁸ Narula, *Hanuman*, 15.

of Hanuman that have inspired regional and folk traditions.¹⁹ For example, in the *Brahma Purana*, Vayu is the father of Hanuman but Hanuman's mother, Anjani who is in the form of a female monkey, has a co-wife, Adrika. Adrika is in the form of a cat and is impregnated with another deity's son and Hanuman's half-brother. Together, Hanuman and his half-brother Pishachraja (the king of goblins) free their mothers from their animal forms by bathing them in the Godavari River.²⁰ This birth story of Hanuman underscores his connection with the ruler of a group of spirits that often torment other beings, and reinforces Hanuman's role as the healer of mental illnesses at temples like Mehendipur Balaji, in Rajasthan where Hanuman performs exorcism on 'possessed' devotees.²¹

Hanuman was already linked to the Vishnu traditions through his role in the Ramayana, but the later birth narratives of Hanuman affirm his status as the eleventh incarnation of Shiva. Thus, the Vaishnava and Shaiva traditions find common ground in Hanuman worship. Hanuman assumes the role of the "middleman"²² in the Vaishnava-Shaiva dialectical exchange. Through the various Ramayans produced after the eleventh century, Hanuman's *bhakti* (devotion) towards Rama is nuanced and the emotional attachment between Hanuman and Rama is shaped. For example, Buddharaju's Telegu version of the Ramayana recounts an episode when Rama stops at Mount Suvel to repose and Hanuman gently massages Rama's feet. Later, Tulsidas describes the same episode in the Avadhi *Ramcharitmanas* in a passage meant for meditative visualization.²³ Hanuman is also reimagined as the embodiment of *shakti* (power) as an avatar of Rudra, a fierce form of Shiva; an episode from Valmiki's *Ramayana* of Hanuman fetching medicinal herbs for wounded soldiers is exaggerated to include a fight between Hanuman and two demons sent by Ravana—Kalnemi and Makari, giving Hanuman an opportunity to demonstrate his warrior side.²⁴

The dramatic increase of histories, and by extension functions, of Hanuman in the Hindu pantheon, provides evidence for Hanuman's rise to prominence. From Valmiki's version of a hero sidekick,²⁵ Hanuman has evolved into an independent hero and god. The story of Hanuman's journey to the underworld to fight Mahiravana/Ahiravana and rescue Rama and Lakshman confirms Hanuman's role as a hero in his own right. This story, though not mentioned by Valmiki or Tulsidas, has

¹⁹ Lutgendorf, "Monkey in the Middle," 319.

²⁰ Ibid., 318. Lutgendorf notes that the sons bathe their mothers at the exact spot where Vrishakapi supposedly slew a demon for Indra. This story thus links Hanuman to Vrishakapi in the mind of the author.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 327.

²³ Philip Lutgendorf, "My Hanuman is Bigger Than Yours," *History of Religions* 33, no. 3 (1994): 228.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ See notes 14 and 15.

been incorporated in almost all modern retellings of the *Ramayana*. *Hanuman vs Mahiravana*, India's first 3D animated film, adopts this story and Hanuman as its primary hero instead of the prince of Ayodhya. The plurality of Hanuman stories provide developing media genres in India, like animation, enough narrative material to curate novel plots for their purpose. The contradictory stories of Hanuman also provide imaginative freedom to artists to develop changing iconographical histories and stories of Hanuman. For example, the animated media can conflate different versions of Hanuman like *bal* (child) Hanuman and *vir* (hero) Hanuman into the same story line without appearing to present conflicting accounts of Hanuman. I will elaborate more on the visual representations of Hanuman in the following sections.

Hanuman and Hindutva

Rajiv Chilaka, the CEO of Green Gold Animation studios which produced the movie *Hanuman vs Mahiravana*, said in an interview, "Indian mythological stories depict our culture and heritage, and many parents want their children to read and watch our stories." A brief study of the reviews of successful animation movies like *Hanuman* (2005), demonstrates that a large percentage of positive reviews focus on the movies ability to 'preserve' the Indian (and implied Hindu) culture. This desire for 'preservation' is partly felt because of the increased presence of Western media on Indian television and theatre screens. However, by trying to preserve the 'Indian' culture through Hindu narratives, the animation industry echoes the Hindu nationalist belief that Indian culture and Hindu culture are synonymous. Additionally, the animation industry's appropriation of Hanuman as the ultimate superhero corresponds with the Hindu extremists reading of Hanuman as the premium warrior against the Muslim 'other.' To both understand the complicity of the animated Hanuman with the biased and often violent language of Hindutva and the explosive expansion of Hanuman worship in the twenty-first century, we must understand Hanuman's role in the Hindutva argument.

Hanuman's growth in literary texts (as demonstrated above) and visual representations corresponds with the increase of Rama worship. Some scholars argue that the prominence Rama worship has gained in the last millennium is a reaction to the presence of the Islamic other in the sub-continent. Sheldon Pollock reasons that the perceived oppression of Hindu elites by Islamic rulers may have bolstered the religiosity of Rama worship in the sub-continent. He highlights an inscription dated 1168, in which King Prithviraj II claimed to be Rama incarnate who dili-

gently fought the *rakshas* (demon) Muslims.²⁶ But as both Lutgendorf and Pollock point out, understanding the popularity of Rama primarily through the presence of the Islamic ‘other’ is dependent on the reading of only a few select patterns, histories, and events.²⁷ The possibility that Ram and his companions gained their cult following because of the Hindu reaction to Muslim rule serves to bolster the Hindu nationalists’ evidence for a war between the two religious communities that pre-dates the violence of 1947 and the history of British Raj in India.

In modern Indian politics, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) embodies the values of Hindutva and forwards and supports readings similar to Pollock’s without taking into account the concerns that readings like Pollock raise. BJP has often criticised its biggest opposition party, Indian National Congress, for propagating or even manufacturing a secularist Indian history that describes “communalism” as a by-product of the policies of the British Raj.²⁸ Instead of tracing the background of BJP or the Hindutva movement in politics, I focus on arguably the most significant issue through which BJP and its allies Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) captured the national imagination—the *Ram janmabhoomi* (birth place of Ram) debate. For further examination of Hindutva and its relation to Hanuman, we must depart from our discussion of Hanuman and briefly concern ourselves with Rama and the physicality of his birth site.

Ayodhya, a city in northern India, is recognized as the birthplace of Rama and the setting of the epic Ramayana. Hindu nationalists believe that the supposed spot of Rama’s birth in Ayodhya was commemorated by a temple which was later destroyed by Mir Baqi, Mughal King Babur’s general, who built a mosque at the site. The mosque built by Mir Baqi came to be known as Babri Masjid (Babur’s mosque). The first recorded incidents of communal violence on the site date back to the 1850s. As a response to the sectarian violence, the British Colonial Government divided the mosque to allow both Muslims and Hindus to pray at the site. In independent India, the dispute revived on December 22, 1949. A statue of Lord Rama was placed inside the mosque on the night of December 21-22, and when Ayodhya woke up to the news of Rama’s return to his supposed birthplace, the Hindu opposition to the mosque strengthened two fold.

In 1987, a few decades after the orchestrated appearance of Rama’s statue within the mosque, Doordarshan, India’s national broadcasting channel, began to televise Ramanand Sagar’s *Ramayana*. The seventy-eight episode television series almost instantaneously evoked a deepened sense of piety and religiosity in Hindus

²⁶ Sheldon Pollock, “Ramayana and political imagination in India,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 52, no 2 (1993): 273.

²⁷ Lutgendorf, “My Hanuman is Bigger Than Yours,” 235.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 236.

some of who, among other things, began to perform purification rituals before watching the program, decorating their television sets with flowers, and worshipping the actors starring in the program. An article in the *Dainik Jagran* reported that each week in a sweetshop at an intersection in Banaras, makeshift arrangements were made to set up a borrowed television set which was sanctified with cow dung and Ganges water. Several hundred residents of the neighborhood gathered to receive the *darshan*²⁹ (sight) of Rama on television.³⁰

The amplified Hindu sentiment aroused by the television series furthered the cause of the Hindu nationalists who were quick to bank on the cult following of the program and the power of the audio-visual medium. J.K studios owned by J.K Jain, a senior member of the BJP, produced a video called *God manifests himself* in 1989 which offered a historical chronology of the dispute surrounding Rama's birthplace.³¹ The dissemination of the video was strategically done through mobile video vans and by holding private and semi-private screening in neighborhoods with strong ties to RSS or similar organizations.³² The *God manifests himself* video was carefully designed to incorporate poster images of Lord Rama with perspectives similar to those of the Ramayana television series; the television series, like the posters, had close up shots of the eyes of the actor playing Rama to imitate the ocular interaction of a deity and devotee in ritual environments.³³ The BJP further associated itself with the success of the television series by inviting Deepika Chikhalaria, the actress who played Sita on the program, to join the party.³⁴

It is in the context of their call to action to—"once again help Rama" that Hindu nationalists invoke Hanuman. In 1984, VHP leaders began to form "youth wings" called Bajrang Dal or the "army of Hanuman."³⁵ For the most part, any male youth could seize a weapon and tie the symbolic saffron scarf on his arm to join the movement.³⁶ Bajrang Dal became infamous for rioting and inciting communal violence. While accompanying senior members of BJP who were performing the *rath yatra* (chariot pilgrimage), the young men wore monkey masks to reinforce their relationship to Hanuman.³⁷ Bajrang Dal played a key role in the demolition of the Babri Masjid on December 6, 1992.

²⁹ Diana Eck, *Darshan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 9.

³⁰ Philip Lutgendorf, "Ramayana: The video," *The drama review: A journal of performance studies* 34, no 2 (2016): 137.

³¹ As Christiane Brosius notes, the Hindi title of the video was *Bhaye Prakat Kripala*. Christiane Brosius, "Hindutva intertextuality: videos and the politics of representation" in *Beyond Appearances?: Visual Practices and Ideologies in Modern India*, eds. Sumathi Ramaswamy (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2003), 265.

³² *Ibid.*, 268.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Caroline M. Cusack, "The Gods on Television: Ramanand Sagar's Ramayan, Politics and . Popular Piety in Late Twentieth-century India" in *Brill Handbooks on Contemporary Religion: Handbook of Hyper-Real Religions* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 280.

³⁵ Philip Lutgendorf, *Hanuman's Tale: The Messages of Divine Monkey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 367.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 369.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 367.

The functions, modalities, and leadership of the Bajrang Dal allude to the fact that Hindu nationalists consider Hanuman to be a deity suited for “children, tribals, Dalits, and unruly youth who lack the discipline to join RSS.”³⁸ In 2018, Yogi Adityanath, a senior BJP member and Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, described Hanuman as a “forest dweller” and “Dalit” from a “deprived background.”³⁹ Adityanath’s comments have attracted criticism from not only Dalits and Brahmin but also from Bajrang Dal leaders because his comments uncover the subaltern role of Hanuman in the Hindu nationalist’s narrative.⁴⁰

The animation industries invocations of Hanuman to ‘preserve’ the Indian or Hindu culture possess a distressing similarity to the Hindu nationalists invocation of Hanuman to ‘liberate’ Ayodhya; both imagine Hanuman as a hero who can rescue the Indian culture from the threatening ‘other.’ Though the animation industry has imagined the West as the ‘other’ and not Muslims, the idea that Indian culture is under attack by the hegemony of the West is not absent in Hindutva politics. Hindutva is concerned not only with the Muslim ‘other’ but also with the Western ‘other.’ When Narendra Modi, the Indian Prime Minister from BJP, accuses the Congress Party to have failed in promoting *khadi*, a hand-woven cloth made in India he is implying that his opposition is deeply western and thus, threatening to the traditional Indian arts and values.⁴¹ In the later sections, I nuance how the iconography of the animated Hanuman has tried to remove himself from language of Hindu nationalism, but at the same time digest, some of its less radical messages.

Hanuman in the Gym

Yogi Adityanath’s description of Hanuman as “Dalit” also alludes to the Hindu Nationalist’s attempt to humanize or anthropomorphize Hanuman. What would the Hindu nationalists’ version of Hanuman look like? Karan Acharya, a graphic designer in Kerala, designed an image of Hanuman that has become ubiquitous in urban centers like Bangalore. Acharya’s Hanuman stands against a saffron background with an angry look on his face. The ubiquitous “angry Hanuman,” has been popularized as *Rudra Hanuman* and many are troubled by the saffron background’s political hues.⁴² Narendra Modi has praised the artwork and hailed it as “the pride of Mangaluru”⁴³ and Hindu nationalists have hailed it as the “new face

³⁸ Ibid., 370.

³⁹ Pragya Singh, “Yogi Adityanath’s description of Hanuman as ‘Dalit’ boomeranged on him; comparison seen to reinforce ‘subordinate’ status,” *Firstpost*, December 8th 2018, <https://www.firstpost.com/author/pragya-singh>.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Narendra Modi tweet feed, accessed on December 16, 2018, <https://twitter.com/narendramodi/status/1070275057362976768>.

⁴² Deepa Bhashti, “The mystery behind why Bengaluru is covered is covered in stickers of ‘angry Hanuman,” *Scroll*, February 7th 2017 <https://scroll.in/magazine/825967/the-mystery-behind-why-bengaluru-is-covered-in-stickers-of-angry-hanuman>.

⁴³ Chethan Misquith, “Modi hails Mangaluru-based Artist’s Angry Hanuman,” *Times of India* <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com>.

of Hinduism.”⁴⁴ The appeal of the artwork to the Hindu nationalists is apparent when viewed in the context of the masculine and “warrior-like” images of Rama and Hanuman historically displayed on the Hindutva stage.⁴⁵ However, the appeal of Acharya’s Hanuman to Hindu nationalists does not necessarily mean that Acharya’s Hanuman is appealing to its onlookers, clientele or Hanuman worshippers because of Hindutva ideology. The iconographical biography of Hanuman’s humanized and masculine body is intensely linked to the experience of modernity in India.

Independent images of Hanuman only started appearing in the eighth or ninth century; they are usually roughly carved and rarely include inscriptions. Further, these images are difficult to date since they are usually outdoors or sometimes coated with *sindur*—a vermillion paste, the repeated application of which can slowly erode the surface of images.⁴⁶ Images of Hanuman brandishing a club or a mace begin to appear in modest numbers during this time as well.⁴⁷ However, images of the anthropomorphized Hanuman begin to appear only under colonial rule and multiply in post-colonial India.

The emphasis placed by colonial thought and practice in India on ‘naturalism’ and ‘rationalism’ echo even today in the Hindu world where Hindu’s rationalise Rama’s weapons as ‘nuclear bombs’ and the flying chariot of Ravana as a ‘hovercraft’.⁴⁸ The colonial descriptions of Hinduism as “childlike” and “primitive”⁴⁹ have had a lasting impact on Hindu thought, literature and iconography. Hanuman represents a problem for the ‘rational’ Hindu: how does one defend the worship of the divine monkey? Humanising Hanuman was one solution presented in a poster attributed to painter Ravi Varma. The poster shows Hanuman distinctly lacking simian features; he is hairless, has thin human calves, and almost a disembodied tail.⁵⁰ Ravi Varma’s Hanuman can be imagined as the middle ground between the simian Hanuman and the present muscular-torso-sporting-masculine Hanuman.

Images have organic histories, depending on the context in which they are viewed, they can tell different individuals varied things. Tracing a linear history of a certain method or preference in the iconography of Hanuman would be imprudent because much of the history of deity and the image would be excluded.

⁴⁴ For reference to Hindu Nationalist rhetoric on Karan Acharya’s Hanuman see www.hinduismnow.org.

⁴⁵ Brosius, “Hindutva Intervisuality,” 286.

⁴⁶ Philip Lutgendorf, “Evolving a Monkey: Hanuman, Poster Art and Postcolonial Anxiety” in *Beyond Appearances? : Visual Practices and Ideologies in Modern India*, ed. Sumathi Ramaswamy (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2003), 76.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Lutgendorf, “Monkey in the Middle,” 324.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Lutgendorf, “Evolving a monkey,” 91.

Thus, several factors can account for the iconography of the muscular Hanuman. Hindutva, as I have discussed in the previous section, can be traced as a source for the popularity of the muscular Hanuman especially in the context of the activities of Bajrang Dal. However, the stylistic choice of artists to draw a humanised Hanuman may depend on other explanations. For example, when Karan Acharya was asked why his Hanuman looks angry, the artist explained that he had sketched the Hanuman for friends from his village and that “my [his] Hanuman is not angry, he is just attitude Hanuman.”⁵¹ The idea for Karan Acharya was to draw a picture of Hanuman that was relatable to his young friends. And as interviews of shopkeepers selling the posters reveal, Acharya’s “attitude Hanuman” is “fashionable” and “trendy.” If anything Karan Acharya’s Hanuman is a symbol of middle-class India’s pop-culture.

Apart from the personal preferences or stylistic choices of artists and the philosophies of Hindu nationalists, Kajri Jain points out that some of Hanuman’s earlier overemphasized muscularity may be credited to his subaltern status as “an animal, devotee, and a servant.”⁵² The exposure of Hanuman’s lower body musculature is indicative of hard labour and not a look not flaunted by high caste men or high ranking gods.⁵³ As the muscularity of the male body became fashionable and appealing to Indians, Hanuman’s muscularity began to become a representative of modern ideals of *shakti*, or power, and ambition. When images of Bruce Lee and Sylvester Stallone began to pour into the Indian television and theatre screens and actors like Salman Khan began to become famous for their muscled and often shirtless bodies, Hanuman’s muscularity becomes aspirational to his devotees. Talwarkars, one of the largest gym chains in India, proudly include depictions of Hanuman in all their fitness centres. The depictions of Hanuman in the Talwarkars have enormous biceps and a six-pack torso as the director of the gym chain identifies Hanuman as “the god of strength” and describes gyms as “aspirational space[s].”⁵⁴ As middle class India becomes more attuned with gyms and health clubs, Hanuman, a deity who has frequently responded to mimesis, becomes a “wish-image,” an image to aspire to.

Brosius argues that Ayodhya, *Rama janmabhoomi* in particular, has become a “wish image” representing a utopian society and a goal that can be achieved if

⁵¹ Deepa Bhashti, “The Mystery behind Why Bengaluru Is Covered in Stickers of ‘Angry Hanuman,’” *Scroll*, February 7th 2017 <https://scroll.in/magazine/825967/the-mystery-behind-why-bengaluru-is-covered-in-stickers-of-angry-hanuman>.

⁵² Kajri Jain, “Muscularity and its Ramifications: Mimetic Male bodies in Indian Mass Culture” in *Sexual Sites, Seminal Attitudes: Sexualities, Masculinities and Culture in South Asia*, ed. Sanjay Srivastava (New Delhi: SAGE publications India, 2004), 311.

⁵³ Lutgendrof, “Evolving a monkey,” 97.

⁵⁴ Thomas Rogers, “India Is Getting Fat. This Gym Chain Wants to Get Huge,” *Bloomberg Businessweek*, December 19th, 2017, www.bloomberg.com.

Rama returns home to his rightful birth-place.⁵⁵ I would argue that as muscularity increasingly becomes a sign for upward social mobility in India, Hanuman represents a similar ‘wish-image.’ Joseph Alter notes that for North Indian wrestlers, both Muslim and Hindu, Hanuman is an embodiment of *shakti* (power) and *bhakti* (devotion). For wrestlers *shakti* is never just physical strength but a combination of physical strength, devotion, and self-control.⁵⁶ Outside the *akhara* (wrestling ground), in the context of the gym, Hanuman’s body personifies *shakti* and has become an object of devotion. Hanuman worship is often geared towards the prompt fulfilment of material desires,⁵⁷ which for men in the context of the gym, is obtaining Hanuman’s body itself. The Hanuman depictions in Talwalkars mimic the body of an unnamed winner of the “Mr. Maharashtra Bodybuilding Competition.” This is not uncommon, as Hanuman’s muscularity has both mimicked real-world idealized muscular male bodies and been mimicked to demonstrate the same. For example, The Great Gama, a famous wrestler, often posed as Hanuman, while Dara Singh a wrestler turned actor was cast to play the role of Hanuman in the movie *Bajrangbali* (1976) and the television serial *Ramayana* in 1987.

The intersubjectivity of Hanuman’s muscular body is pervasive in the iconography of the animated Hanuman. In the animated movie *Hanuman Da’ damdar* (2017), the Bollywood star Salman Khan lends his voice to the adult-muscular Hanuman. Not only does the animated Hanuman get associated with the actor’s voice but also becomes the actor when he repeats lines from Salman Khan’s most popular movies. In the earliest scenes from the movie, the audience see Valmiki confront Hanuman and complain that Hanuman’s *Ramayana* will overshadow his own version of the epic. Hanuman replies to the sage by destroying his *Ramayana* and promises Valmiki that Valmiki’s words will continue to reign till eternity. Hanuman then reminds Valmiki “once I [Hanuman] have made a commitment, I don’t even let myself change my mind”⁵⁸ a phrase from Salman Khan’s famous movie *Wanted* (2009). The dialogue is appropriated from Salman’s earlier film but is intended to echo Hanuman’s characteristic loyalty to Rama. Like Karan Acharya’s *Rudra Hanuman*, the movie *Hanuman Da’ Damdar* attempts to make Hanuman more relatable to the contemporary audience—and thus there is a sense in which the humanization and muscularity of Hanuman represents a certain aesthetic ideal present in and expected from India’s contemporary Bollywood heroes.

⁵⁵ Brosius, “Hindutva Intersubjectivity”, 283.

⁵⁶ Joseph S. Alter, “Hanuman and the Moral Physique of the Banarsi Wrestler” In *Living Banaras: Hindu Religion in Cultural Context*, eds., Bradey R. Hertel and Cynthia Ann Humes (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 137-143.

⁵⁷ Narula, *Hanuman*, 24.

⁵⁸ A rough Hindi translation of the dialogue. *Hanuman Da Damda*, directed by Ruchi Jain, (Mumbai: Percept Pictures, 2017).

Conclusion: The Animation Industry's Hanuman

In the context of the above discussions, it may seem that men primarily worship Hanuman. Hanuman in his macho figure is depicted as a celibate warrior who is often not supposed to be touched by women. However, in most Hanuman temples a substantial number of women devotees can be observed taking *darshan* of Hanuman. Lutgendorf notes that when asked, “women cited the same reasons for worshipping Hanuman that men did...his worship is simple and inexpensive, he manifests both *śakti* [power] and *bhakti* [devotion], and he is *jāgrt* (‘awake, alert, responsive’) deity who gives results—sons, wealth, relief from worldly affliction, as well as mental peace and spiritual experiences.” As noted in the previous section, Hanuman is a deity whose worship is mostly geared towards the attainment of material desires and not *moksha* or liberation (though there may be exceptions to this). Hanuman is often worshiped by women in North Indian folk tales to bless them with children (especially sons) and to cure their barrenness.⁵⁹

Hanuman is frequently worshipped as a child by women.⁶⁰ In folklore and iconography, Hanuman occasionally appears as the protector or attendant of the Devi and is considered to embody *shakti*, a power that women especially hold.⁶¹ Further, Sita and Hanuman's relationship reinforces his role as the protector of the Devi; in many episodes of the *Ramayana*, Hanuman addresses Sita as ‘Mother’ and plays the role of her protector and aide.⁶² Psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar examines the relationship of Sita and Hanuman and concludes that their relationship personifies the fantasy of numerous married women to have a son who is their “loving savior” and “protector.”⁶³

The chubby baby Hanuman poster for the animated feature film *Hanuman* (2005) mentioned in the introduction was not just a poster meant to attract and invoke the curiosity of children, but women devotees of Hanuman as well. The movie begins with Vishnu declaring that he will take birth on earth as Rama to defeat the evil forces that wreak havoc on the planet with the help of Shiva. Immediately, through the lens of the camera, the audience ascends Mount Kailash where Shiva declares that he will be born as Hanuman, a celibate monkey, as his eleventh avatar. Through the first few scenes, the movie successfully portrays Hanuman as a common deity to Shaiva and Vaishnava traditions while also asserting Hanuman's essentiality to the success of Rama. Soon enough Hanuman is born to

⁵⁹ Narula, *Hanuman*, 24.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ For references on shakti see work cited in note 56.

⁶² Lutgendorf, “Monkey in the Middle,” 322.

⁶³ Sudhir Kakar, *The Inner World*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1978), 88-89, quoted in Philip Lutgendorf, “Monkey in the Middle: The Status of Hanuman in Popular Hinduism,” *Religion* 27 no. 4 (1997): 311–332 <https://doi.org/10.1006/reli.1997.0095>

Anjani through the intervention of Vayu. The movie is predictably subtle about the rape of Anjani by Vayu; it depicts Anjani being taken by surprise by strong winds while worshipping Shiva. Anjani quickly realizes that someone has “touched” her and demands to know who it was. Suddenly the god of wind, Vayu appears and tells her that she will be pregnant with a son, who will be known as Pavanaputra and Vayu will be the child’s godfather. Since *Hanuman* was advertised as a family movie it is no surprise that Anjani’s rape is not explicitly shown. But what would the adult female audience, who were familiar with the story of Anjani’s non-consensual encounter with Vayu, have had thought about the scene while watching the movie in the theatre?

As we have noted before, in the multiplying birth narratives of Hanuman, Hanuman’s patrimony is complicated to accommodate more divine actors to empower Hanuman with more powers and functions. However, in certain birth narratives of Hanuman, we find that the violent or non-consensual nature of Anjani’s pregnancy undergoes dramatic change. For example, in one of the birth stories, Anjana (or Anjani) is depicted as worshipping Shiva on a mountaintop with the hope of conceiving a valiant son. She then becomes pregnant after accidentally swallowing rice porridge dropped in her mouth by a female vulture flying overhead. This was no ordinary porridge, it was actually Vishnu’s seed that had emerged at the sacrificial altar of King Dashrath in Ayodhya and was to be divided among his three queens. A bit of one of his queen’s portions was carried by the vulture and later consumed by Anjani, who then became pregnant with Hanuman.⁶⁴ This birth narrative certainly ties Hanuman and Rama more closely, however, could it also be attempting to change the verbal and textual iconography of Anjani’s rape?

I am wary of extending the modern understanding of rape and consent to ancient, medieval, and mythic narratives as certainly violence against women was understood much differently amongst the contemporary audiences of these texts than the modern audience. Additionally, within modern Hinduism and Hanuman worship, it is difficult to conclusively understand the ‘rape’ of Anjani since Hanuman is celebrated widely as Pavanaputra, Maruti, etc., and yet visual representations of Hanuman’s birth repeatedly try to minimize the level of contact between Anjani and Vayu. Thus, to conclusively comment on the individual experience of women watching the movie *Hanuman* would be imprudent (and outside the scope of our discussion).

I mention and discuss the above scene because it reinforces Romila Thapars’ concern that visual media can establish the cultural hegemony of certain mytho-

⁶⁴ Lutgendorf, “Monkey in the Middle,” 319.

logical narratives by privileging one specific (usually North Indian) version of a myth “while marginalizing and ironing out...other cultural expressions.”⁶⁵ The animation industry has repeatedly adopted or alluded to the birth narrative of Hanuman established in the Sanskrit *Ramayana*. In the context of the television program *Ramayana* (1978), Thapar notes that what the television version of the myth left out was the varied versions of the *Ramayana* in the folk genre.⁶⁶ Similarly, by privileging the straightforward birth story of Hanuman presented in Valmiki’s *Ramayana*, the movie *Hanuman* (2005) strengthens one particular reading of Hanuman’s myth, religiosity, and dominion. However, the animation industry’s emphasis on certain stories of Hanuman and exclusion of other narratives about the deity is not driven by an explicit desire to “expunge diversities and present a homogenized view”⁶⁷ but from practical reasons. Depicting multiple and contradictory narratives is costly and difficult and by appropriating popular stories that middle-class Indians know and adore the industry has better chances of maximizing its profit.

The animated movie *Hanuman* did not limit itself to depicting Valmiki’s and Tulsidas’s stories about *Hanuman* but created a narrative that included the most popular stories about Hanuman. For example, in the movie Hanuman travels underground to defeat Ahiravana (or Mahiravana) and rescues Rama and Laxman. Later in the film, after Rama and Sita return to Ayodhya, Sita presents Hanuman with a pearl necklace which the divine monkey picks apart saying that it holds no value for him since it does not have Rama within it. When Vibhishana (though in other narratives it is often Lakshman) asks Hanuman that what is the value of Hanuman’s body which does not hold Rama, Hanuman rips open his chest to reveal a picture of Rama and Sita in his heart.⁶⁸ Both these narratives acknowledge stories about Hanuman that are popular in urban India. They also build on the iconography of Hanuman found in posters. The scene in which Hanuman reveals the picture of Rama and Sita in his heart mimics popular poster iconography of the divine monkey. Thus, the animated movie *Hanuman* both altered and embellished certain aspects of Hanuman’s myth and iconography.

Hanuman’s success and ability to incorporate Hanuman’s myth creatively did not guarantee that other adaptations of the deity in animated media received the same acclaim. The Indian animation industry has had to respond to the limitations of the same popularity of Hanuman that it capitalizes on. The case of the digital game *Hanuman: Boy Warrior* best illustrates this fact. *Hanuman: Boy Warrior*

⁶⁵ Romila Thapar, “The Ramayana Syndrome,” *Seminar*, vol. 353, (1989): 74.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Hanuman*, directed by V.G. Samant, (Mumbai: Sahara One Motion Pictures, 2005).

intended to depict the adventures of Bal Hanuman. In the game, Hanuman (the Player) encounters Sadhus or Sages to learn more about his powers.⁶⁹ As Hanuman advances in the game, he acquires different skills and is rewarded for every demon he kills. The game received intense criticism from Indian gamers for its weak animation and gaming features. However, a Nevada-based Hindu organization, Universal Society of Hinduism, alleged that the game trivialized the deity by allowing players to control and manipulate Hanuman in the game. Universal Society of Hinduism called on Hindus to boycott Sony products and demanded that the company remove the game from its platform.⁷⁰ The opposition to the game was not aimed against the incorporation of Hindu deities in digital media, but the trivialization of the deity that the player's ability of controlling the deity allowed. On the other hand, the sequel of *Hanuman*, *Hanuman Returns* (2007), received backlash from Hindu nationalists who were trying to arguably "preserve" the traditional Hindu image of Hanuman and protect the deity from becoming a "cartoon."⁷¹ None of these debates attracted the attention of Indians and thus the animation industry has not stopped in its efforts to make Hanuman India's ultimate superhero.

Hanuman Da' Damdar, as noted in the previous section, draws a parallel between Hanuman and Salman Khan, in an attempt to make the Hindu deity more relatable to its young audience. But by casting Salman Khan, a Muslim actor, as the voice actor for Hanuman, and by making Hanuman recite the actor's famous dialogues, the movie endeavored to make Hanuman a secular deity. Though the animation industry partly capitalizes on the portrayal of Hanuman as the warrior hero in Hindutva rhetoric, its ambition for Hanuman is different from those of the Hindu nationalists. The animation industry, as demonstrated by *Hanuman Da' Damdar*, hopes to successfully create a 'superhero Hanuman' that resembles his western counterparts like Superman. *Hanuman Da' Damdar* does not incorporate any traditional Hanuman myths; rather it creates its own narrative about how Bal Hanuman defeats the king of Lanka and realizes that he is Vir Hanuman (or in the context of the film, Salman Khan).

Hanuman vs Mahiravana (2018) is the latest installation in the series of animated films featuring Hanuman and it aptly captures the animation industry's desire to create a 'superhero Hanuman.' The movie narrates the well-known adventures of Hanuman underground to save Rama and Laxman like the animated movie *Hanuman* had done previously. But whereas *Hanuman*, depicted a human-

⁶⁹ Zeiler, "Global Mediatization," 71.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 76.

⁷¹ "Bihar Jagriti Manch protests against animated movies on Lord Hanuman," *Hindustan Times*, December 27, 2007, www.hindu-standtime.com.

ized and muscular Hanuman, *Hanuman vs Mahiravana* depicts Hanuman as a muscular monkey resembling the main characters from the movie *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (2014). *Hanuman vs Mahiravana* arguably builds on the depictions of Hanuman in previous animations; like the movie *Hanuman* it incorporates popular stories of Hanuman; it draws inspiration for its animation from the digital game *Gamaya Legend* and creates a game-like action-packed narrative resembling *Hanuman: Boy Warrior*; and lastly, it builds on *Hanuman Da Damdar's* effort to make Hanuman a superhero but does so by trying to equate Hanuman to heroes that don't have a human form like the *Ninja Turtles*.

The animation industry capitalizes on the existing popularity of Hanuman and fuels it with new narratives. The diverse tales of Hanuman's birth and childhood offer the animation industry enough stories and imaginative freedom to keep recreating the animated Hanuman. Hindutva politics has certainly stimulated narratives that call on Hindus to protect their culture, faith, and religion. Hindutva narratives motivate Hindu parents to make their children more aware of Hindu myths through genres that children prefer like animation and by extension, guarantee a market for products starring Hindu deities like Hanuman. But as I have demonstrated in this essay, Hanuman's appeal is not limited to those who propagate or believe in Hindutva. Hanuman's complex simian status makes him a minor deity in comparison to deities like Rama and with the rise of militant Hinduism in India, Hanuman's status as a popular yet minor deity to Rama makes it possible for him to be easily incorporated into India's popular culture. Thus, Hanuman's presence in pop-culture and emerging media genres give him a ubiquitous quality that most deities find difficult to establish. Hanuman's myth, iconography, and simian status allow the animation industry to create narratives that can satisfy modern India's demand for the ultimate Indian superhero who can rival even Superman in strength and appeal. But in their ambition to meet the aesthetic, narrative, and visual demands of the dynamic popular culture of India, the animation industry threatens to freeze a certain version of Hanuman's myth and complicate his status in Hindu religiosity by portraying him as India's superhero and not the divine-monkey worshipped by millions of Hindus in Hindu temples.

<Appendix—Images of Hanuman in Popular Culture>⁷²



⁷² The first image is from the cover of the DVD sold on Amazon.com <https://www.amazon.in/Hanuman-Limited-Collectors-Archiv/dp/B0083T3B88>

The second image is from the movie poster <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt6941654/mediaviewer/rm2956733184>

The third image is the sticker of angry Hanuman <https://scroll.in/magazine/825967/the-mystery-behind-why-bengaluru-is-covered-in-stickers-of-angry-hanuman>

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